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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses strategies for teaching college composition, emphasizing "mechanical-meaningful-communicative" (M-M-C) sequencing. Under the M-M-C sequence, a student performs the following exercises: mechanical exercises, which build success in stimulus-response learning; meaningful exercises, which provide stimuli for problem-solving tasks; and communicative exercises, which promote individual writing strategies developed from the stimulus-response experiences. Thus, the M-M-C strategy combines behavioral and cognitive learning theories to facilitate writing development. Modular learning and programmed instruction are also presented as strategies to be used within the M-M-C sequence. (RL)

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INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING WRITING

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INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING WRITING

Ever since the writing crisis has become a big news item in the popular press, we composition teachers have been attracting our share of fame and notoriety--perhaps more notoriety since we live in a "grammar conscious" society in need of a scapegoat for the national literacy problem. Regardless of the bad press, resulting partly from misinterpretations of the 4 C's position on Students' Right to Their Own Language and partly from misconceptions about the meaning of basics, most college composition teachers have managed to endure. In fact, most of us continue the search for new and better ways to help students expand their writing skills.

Our professional differences of opinion on how to teach composition notwithstanding, we reach nearly unilateral agreement in accepting the responsibility to increase the efficiency of student performance in Edited American English or what I choose to call standard formal writing. This professional responsibility exists not because the standard dialect or formal style is superior to any others but simply because this brand of writing has been unofficially established as the language of communication in the world of the educated--by academic, professional, and business persons alike.

What I would like to propose today is not another diatribe that attempts to test all of us in our sensitivity to and respect for the obvious dialectal variety in our culturally diverse society. Rather, let's posit the socio-educational reality that EAE is the target dialect in most composition programs and on the basis of this reality determine which strategies are most useful in improving student skills in the complex writing process.

There is a wealth of educational resources for developing teaching strategies in the language arts, and not all come from teaching English to native users, the discipline probably most familiar to us. Other resources for discovering teaching strategies include the disciplines of English as a second language, foreign language, and reading. The educational taxonomies and flowcharts, which underlie many concrete teaching strategies, vary in their emphasis on cognitive and behavioral dimensions of language use. To the teacher with experience in composition, it is apparent that both cognitive and behavioral dimensions of language use are operating when the writer produces and edits standard formal prose. Correspondingly, teaching strategies which demand that the student writer rely on his or her combined cognitive-behavioral skills in the writing (composing) process are likely to be the most effective.

There are a number of techniques which can be incorporated into teaching strategies in writing. For example, the sentence combining technique[1] is a useful sentence level manipulation which can increase the number of options a student has in producing appropriate sentences and expand that student's writing repetoire. However, as one researcher puts it, "Common sense suggests that it can't be the one and only instructional strategy"[2] in a well-integrated composition program. The student must be taken beyond sentence-level exercises to deal with the complex problem-solving challenges presented in the composing process. Although the sentence-combining technique is helpful to students for the behavioral reinforcement it provides, it must be part of a more comprehensive teaching strategy.

The chief strategy I am suggesting for teaching writing to native users of the language is not one of my own invention but one which I discovered in the educational literature for teaching English as a second language.[3] This strategy is a particular kind of sequencing that is highly structured in mechanical, meaningful, and communicative stages and easily adapted to teaching English to native users. The sequencing of writing tasks can be particularly effective if the tasks focus on the development of positive teaching points. In order to adapt this sequencing for teaching composition to native users, I have investigated available studies in researched error analysis[4] of adult writing. On the foundation of findings in error analysis, I established teaching points in general problem areas around which I built mechanical-meaningful-communicative sequencing (M-M-C).

For example, research in error analysis points to run-on sentences as an inappropriate feature for standard formal writing. Some of the research pinpoints surrounding features found in structures containing run-ons. Here is one instance. In the run-on, "I should have gone home instead I decided to play basketball," the transitional marker "instead" appears between the two statements, "I should have gone home--I decided to play basketball" with no punctuation between them. The teaching point based on this finding is to present standard punctuation in consecutive structures which contain transitional markers in the second structure.

Any M-M-C writing sequence which takes into account these features not only provides the student with sufficient behavioral reinforcement by allowing him/her to write sentences with appropriate punctuation, but also forces him or her to rely on the success of the experiences at the

sentence level for writing appropriately in the larger contexts of the paragraph. Thus, the M-M-C writing sequence provides behavioral reinforcement in the mechanical exercises at the sentence level and also allows students to transfer learned skills in the cognitive challenges of creating, organizing, and composing in the context of the paragraph. Appropriate live language models that contain structures which illustrate the pertinent teaching points are useful ways of introducing this sequencing strategy to the student.

In short, the M-M-C sequencing strategy accomodates a happy combination of behavioral and cognitive learning theory. The mechanical exercises build success in stimulus-response learning. The meaningful exercises continue to build stimulus response but also include problem solving tasks of cognition. And the communicative exercises eliminate stimulus-response learning and require cognitive-behavioral strategies for writing. The sentence-level writing practices should include sentence manipulations like sentence combining, conversions, substitutions, and transformations in sequences like those just described. Writing practices based on positive teaching points can build student writing repetoires according to the norms of communication required in the dialect of standard formal writing and prepare the student for the more difficult progressions at the communicative level.

The mechanical-meaningful-communicative sequence can be a matrix strategy for a variety of other strategies in a composition program. The mechanical stage contains the most exercises since its purpose is to condition students to imitate excellent models by asking them to perform specific sentence manipulations on existing surface structures. In the

mechanical stage all lexical information is given to the student. The meaningful stage contains exercises in which the student must creatively supply lexical items. After being provided with an excellent model, the student must write a paragraph in imitation of the syntactic arrangements and punctuation in the model but must provide his/her own lexical information. Finally, the last and most difficult stage of the sequence engages the student in communicative writing; that is, the student must produce an original paragraph without the aid of a model and according to specific directions on the given topic.

The following samples are extracted from one M-M-C sequence in an instructional unit on Run-Ons. The live language model is presented first after which appear the M-M-C writing tasks:

Sample Live Language Model Paragraph

> Neurology professors of a generation ago taught their students that there were four kinds of pain: pricking, aching, clear pain, and quick pain. By the 1970's, their more precise successors could name more than a hundred different kinds. Thus, pain is perhaps the most complex of all the physical sensations. Its many shadings range from the first delicate twinge of a toothache to the searing jab of tic doloreux, a nerve disease that primarily affects older people. As for defining pain, most experts content themselves with a tautology: Pain, they say, is any sensation a person experiences as painful.
>
> --quoted and adapted from The New York Times Magazine (January 30, 1977), p. 12.

The two underlined sentences in this paragraph are highlighted because the second in the sequence is introduced by the transitional marker "thus."

Sample Mechanical Level Writing Task

Directions:

Rewrite the following pairs of sentences as separate

sentences, but place the word "Thus" with a comma after it at the beginning of the second sentence.

Plans for the expansion of the athletic facilities have been approved by the committee.

The new gym will be built this spring.

Sample Meaningful Level Writing Task

Directions:

Rewrite the following sentence. Then write a second sentence in which you supply the information. Introduce the second sentence with the word "Thus."

Television programs are reaching wider viewing audiences every year._____
_____

Sample Meaningful Level Writing Task

Directions:

Finish writing the following paragraph on the given topic by producing the remaining sentences structured after those in the model paragraph.

Automobile manufacturers a half-century ago produced for consumers two basic models in private cars: sedans and sport coupes. Today, their more productive successors offer more than a hundred different models.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Sample Communicative Level Writing Task

Directions:

Write an original paragraph in which you distinguish the features of on and off-campus residency during college. Be sure to use a transitional marker in your paragraph.

Another useful strategy that fits as a corollary to M-M-C sequencing is modularizing. At first modularity of instruction may appear to counter the sequencing progressions because it can isolate parts of the writing process in nonsequential fashion. However, a truly modular strategy can contain highly structured sequences within each and still accomodate non-sequential use between each. For example, when sequencing of writing tasks is the primary teaching strategy, modules of instruction can be built to house those sequences in order to cater to the individual needs of students. The diagnosis of the individual student writer's needs is the most effective way to determine the needed modules. Individualization of instruction for the student writer, even within the limits of a classroom setting, may be enhanced through modularizing instruction. This individualization is a desirable teaching goal, for even those students from dialectally homogeneous backgrounds will be likely to experience different writing problems. Modularizing instruction as a teaching strategy is supported by a number of educators. One source defines modularity by asserting that instead of creating materials in a single volume, "there are separate fascicles or 'modules,' which can be used (or discarded!) individually, or in various combinations with one another."[5] Modular instruction can serve several needs. It can provide students with the total number of units or fascicles to reach their goals, but an individual student might use only one or a number of the modules to reach his or her goal. Modules need not be used in any particular sequence so that the student can use only those needed. Each module, however, would contain a sequence within it so that the writer could move from simple to complex language tasks. A truly modular strategy provides sequencing within modules and a non-sequential arrangement between modules.

It is feasible to adapt the strategy of modularizing to teach some aspects of standard formal writing. Although composition may be realistically viewed as a complex decision-making process, there are isolable parts of the process, for example, the ability to edit and produce some of the superficial features appropriate for the dialect. These isolable parts may become the content of instruction.

The final teaching strategy which I would like to suggest as a corollary to M-M-C sequencing is programming some of the instruction in composition--particularly in the initial stages of the composition program. If effective programming requires the paraphernalia of media materials, then they should be incorporated in the program. Both cognitive and behavioral learning theories justify programmed instruction. Programmed instruction, according to Gagné in The Conditions of Learning, selects for the student the content needed to have the necessary prerequisites for learning each new topic. Further advantages include unhurried choice for selecting proper learning conditions, quality control through consistency, the possibility of pretesting for the instruction, and more efficient management of teacher time to select suitable sequences of topics.[6] The behaviorist B. F. Skinner argues for programmed instruction through the teaching machine.

> The machine itself, of course, does not teach. It simply brings the student into contact with the person who composed the material it presents. It is a labor-saving device because it can bring one programmer into contact with an indefinite number of students. This may suggest mass production, but the effect upon each student is surprisingly like that of a private tutor.[7]

The programming strategy which integrates cognitive challenges and behavioral reinforcement throughout the sequences can facilitate learning

for the writing student who needs to acquire necessary skills for producing and editing standard formal prose. For example, the cognitive challenges can require students to use information gained from the operations on sentences in sequenced exercises, that is, to use the rules internalized through the writing tasks in order to problem solve in his or her own composing process. Behavioral reinforcement is provided in the initial stages of mechanical level writing tasks through the successful feedback of his or her own performance.

Particular uses of language, like acquiring the features of standard formal writing, may be facilitated through instructional strategies that incorporate cognitive and behavioral learning. For example, students who have little or no difficulty in expressing an oral statement in their native dialect may find that the surface features of that utterance are unacceptable according to the norms of the standard dialect. The student in this situation experiences frustration. He or she has the linguistic competence, that is, the cognitive ability to generate an utterance, but he or she lacks communicative competence, that is, the cognitive-behavioral skills necessary to apply the social rules of language use in the given social context. These limitations can be overcome through teaching strategies which facilitate learning progressions in the target dialect.

Although most of what I have been saying is not new, the particular combination of M-M-C sequencing, modularizing, and programming can be used in countless original ways in a composition program. The use of M-M-C sequencing as a matrix teaching strategy through which programming and modularizing also operate forces the composition teacher to get at the underlying structure of the discipline. Instruction that is based on the

fundamental structure in any discipline is not only effective but also essential. Jerome Bruner asserts that the curriculum of a subject should be determined by the most fundamental principles that give that subject its structure, and the goal of finding suitable structure is to insure that the educational process advances cognitive growth.[8] In another work where Bruner and others speak of the transfer of skills as part of the adaptive nature of bahavior, they conclude that "one must work with sequences of response if one is to appreciate the unfolding interplay between successive responses in reaction to prior consequences."[9] Thus, the strategy of sequencing writing responses with the aid of modularizing and programming may be the most accurate predictor of the student writing skills when he or she must produce and edit composition independently.

NOTES

[1]See Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1973). See also Charles Cooper, "An Outline for Writing Sentence Combining Problems," English Journal, 65 (February, 1976), 98.

[2]William Strong,"Close Up: Sentence Combining Back to Basics and Beyond," English Journal, 65 (February, 1976), p. 61.

[3]See Christina Bratt Paulston, "Teaching Writing in the ESOL Classroom: Techniques of Controlled Composition," TESOL Quarterly, 6, No. 1 (March, 1972), 36-37.

[4]See Fred I. Godshalk, Frances Swineford, and William E. Coffman, The Measurement of Writing Ability (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1966); John C. Fisher, Linguistics and Remedial English (The Hague: Mouton, 1966); Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford, 1977).

[5]Earl W. Stevick, Adapting and Writing Language Lessons (Washington, D.C.: HEW, 1971), p. 39.

[6]Robert M. Gagné, The Conditions of Learning (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), pp. 251-53.

[7]B. F. Skinner, Why We Need Teaching Machines: Programs, Teachers and Machines (New York: Bantam, 1964), p. 39.

[8]Jerome S. Bruner, The Process of Education (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 23-26.

[9]Jerome S. Bruner, J. S. Goodnow, and G. A. Austin, A Study of Thinking (New York: Wiley, 1956), p. 2.